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Right now versus back then: Recency and remoteness as discursive resources in online reviews



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ABSTRACT

This study explores variation in temporal reference within a dataset of 1000 user-generated online consumer reviews, sampled from 5 different websites. Analyzing the proportion of references to recency compared with references to remoteness in these texts, an overall trend toward remoteness was found, which diverges from earlier findings about temporality in other types of social media, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Further considering specific examples from three of the five review sites (*Yelp*, *Amazon*, and *Epicurious*), this paper offers insights into how both the remote past and the present are variably deployed as discursive resources by the authors of these online texts. In addition, the study's findings reveal that whereas lexical resources are used to refer to the present/recent past, references to the remote past rely much more on grammatical resources. Consequently, in order to provide a more complete account of time reference, I argue that it is important to consider a broader range of linguistic features (e.g., grammatical aspect, prepositional phrases) rather than concentrating exclusively on temporal adverbs when making claims about temporality in social media.

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1. Introduction

Any act of communication allows language users to encode some type of temporal perspective on the relationship between events. As Hanks (1996) observes, "It is not only discrete acts or kinds of practice that establish different temporalities. The social fields in which practice occurs contribute as well" (p. 271). One social field that has recently become the site of much research interest is that of social media. Sociolinguistic research on temporality in social media has tended to emphasize spatio-temporal immediacy (i.e., the "here and now") in the discourse of diverse media, such as email (Georgakopoulou, 2007), blogs and wikis (Myers, 2010), and social networking sites (Georgakopoulou, 2013; Page, 2010, 2012). However, it is unclear if this bias toward the recent also applies to other forms of digital media, such as user-generated online reviews, which may be comparatively less recency-focused, given that reviews, by definition, are retrospective accounts. Page (2012) has suggested that a focus on recency may be more prevalent in some forms of computer-mediated communication more than others, noting that this emphasis on the present is most dominant on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and that, in contrast, "earlier social media genres (discussion forms, podcasts and blogs) use temporal references with similar frequency to that

found in offline spoken and written language" (p. 191). Therefore, this study aimed to examine the extent to which this orientation to the present – and near-recent past – appears in user-generated online reviews.

1.1. Online reviews as a type of social media

From a historical perspective, user-generated online reviews can be viewed as an extension of two distinct types of discursive practices: professional review writing and informal word-of-mouth recommendations. Traditionally, professional review writing was practiced by a small body of experts, an elite cadre of individuals writing for publications such as newspapers and guidebooks, who provided their subjective assessments of films, restaurants, hotels, as well as other products and services. However, with the expansion of digital media into nearly all realms of contemporary life, user-generated consumer reviews have emerged as a widespread contemporary vernacular literacy practice (Barton and Lee, 2013). Websites that feature reviews, such as *TripAdvisor*, *Amazon*, *Yelp*, and others, enable consumers to give voice to their experiences in very public way, via a mass-distributed platform. Although professionally-written consumer product reviews have been available via mass media outlets for decades, this more recent ability for any consumer to publicly share his/her experiences and reactions to a product or service – and to reach a wide, global, interested audience in the process – is a digital practice for which there is no precise analog precedent. Typically, user-generated reviews are non-specialist reviews, and this fact is considered by some to

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contribute to the democratization of expertise brought about by the internet (Mellet et al., 2014). Online reviews can certainly be considered a form of consumer empowerment from the point of view of individuals writing reviews. In addition, online reviews also have the potential to empower the consumers who read them – in the sense that consumers no longer have to rely on a handful of experts for information about which restaurants are worth visiting, or which products represent the best available quality. Instead, internet users now have access to a multitude of different perspectives about a wider number of products and services than was ever previously possible.¹

For the past decade, scholars in business and marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) have treated online reviews as a technologically-mediated expansion of word-of-mouth recommendation processes, even coining the term “electronic word of mouth” (eWOM) – or, in a more playful iteration, “word of mouse” (Stringham and Gerdes, 2010). Yet, electronic word of mouth differs from more traditional forms of word of mouth in a number of important ways. First, traditional word of mouth is ephemeral, whereas eWOM usually leaves some type of lasting digital record. Furthermore, because traditional word of mouth is spoken, it tends to reach a relatively small audience. In contrast, eWOM is characterized by both massive scale and rapid speed of diffusion. In other words, “information technologies enable opinions of a single individual to instantly reach thousands, or even millions of consumers” (Dellarocas et al., 2004, p. 3). eWOM can also be considered a quintessentially “late modern” form of interaction, in that it centers around practices of consumption (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), and it takes place in a technologically-mediated form, between an author and a potentially vast audience, both of whom are – and may remain – unknown to one another in an offline sense.

At the present time, online consumer reviews are a predominantly text-based,² asynchronous (and sometimes anonymous) genre of computer-mediated communication. Possessing the defining characteristics of other “Web 2.0” genres – such as being participatory, collaborative, user-generated, dynamic and rich in information – online consumer reviews can be considered a type of social media. Yet, online reviews differ from other popular forms of social media because the social ties among participants on most review sites tend to be weaker than on social networking sites, for example. In this respect, online reviews are best described as a “public” rather than “private” mode of computer-mediated discourse (Androutsopoulos, 2013), characterized by relationships of “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna, 2012). Moreover, most online review sites also differ from social networking sites in that they are more “information-focused,” rather than “relationally-driven” communities (Kozinets, 2010).

Certainly, as far as discourse analytic treatments of social media are concerned, online reviews have received less scholarly attention than social networking sites such *Facebook* or *Twitter*. One of the earliest studies of online consumer reviews (Pollach, 2006) adopted a corpus-based approach and explored linguistic features associated with the genre, such as lexical richness, word frequencies, and distributions of personal pronouns. Subsequent studies have examined the discursive construction of reviewers’ identities, addressing matters of reviewer credibility and expertise (Vázquez, 2014a, 2014b; Mackiewicz, 2010a, 2010b). Other studies have examined the ways in which reviewers evaluate (Skalicky, 2013;

Tian, 2013; Taboada, 2011) and narrate (Vázquez, 2012, 2014b) their prior experiences. However, to date, no studies have specifically addressed issues of time reference, or temporality, in online reviews.

1.2. Temporal references in social media

Research on diverse forms of social media collectively points to a trend of temporally-proximal accounts. Several scholars (Barton and Lee, 2013; Lee, 2011; Myers, 2010) have observed that features of a website’s architecture – especially, the wording of prompts for users – contribute to a strong orientation to reporting on the present moment. For example, as Lee (2011) noted, *Facebook*’s prompts to its users (originally, “*What are you doing right now?*”; and more recently, “*What’s on your mind?*”) promote a focus on recency. Similarly, *Twitter*’s prompts, having been changed from “*What are you doing?*” to “*What’s happening?*” in 2009, are designed as “provocations to report ‘what’s happening’ [...] rather than what has happened” (Page, 2012, p. 13). This orientation to the present is supported by other features of site architecture, such as the use of timestamps (especially those which frame the time of posting relative to the present moment at which the audience views the post – e.g., “*7 min ago*”, “*2 h ago*”) as well as through reverse-chronological archiving.

Media-related affordances also shape the ways in which narrativity occurs on social networking sites. Building on a broader framework of “small stories,” Georgakopoulou (2013) notes that the genre of “breaking news” stories dominates most social media today. Breaking news stories are not only based on recent events, but are “portable” from online to offline contexts, and are also characterized by co-construction of multiple tellers. While the focus of the present study is not on narrativity per se, Georgakopoulou’s observations about the pervasiveness of “breaking news” in social media are certainly consistent with other findings about the overwhelming emphasis on recency in online communicative environments.

In online communication, temporal references serve to situate other events relative to the time of posting. According to Hanks (1996), “when [individuals] make reference to time, using temporal adverbs, day names, dates, and the like, they focalize time relations” (p. 272). As far as more specific linguistic markers of temporality are concerned, users of different social media tend to exploit diverse linguistic resources. Page (2012) points out that temporal adverbs associated with the present (e.g., *today*, *tonight*, *just*, *now*) are especially frequent on *Facebook* and *Twitter* updates. This use of recency-focused temporal markers constructs “a sense of an ongoing present,” resulting in posts that are “less retrospective [...] and more grounded in the events of that particular day and the immediate future” (p. 102–3).

On blogs, there is a similar tendency to emphasize the present, illustrated by the high frequency of the adverb *just*, used to create a sense of “at or just before the present moment” (Myers, 2010, p. 69). Myers also found that bloggers also use relational adverbials (*meanwhile*, *for a week*), deictics (*now*, *yesterday*), as well as grammatical aspect (e.g., present perfect, present continuous) to express time. Occasionally, references to the remote past also appear on blogs, and when they do, they serve as a “link between personal experience and wider political events” (p. 75). Nevertheless, the focus on recency is prevalent, and Myers concludes that ultimately “bloggers are stuck in the present moment” (p. 75).

However, more recent studies (Georgalou, 2015; Honkanen et al., 2015) have demonstrated that online spaces can also enable users to engage in collective remembering, imaginings of the past, and performances of nostalgia, by invoking shared, socio-historically specific, cultural references. This suggests that taking a closer look at references to the remote past in digital media is

¹ A more critical discussion of issues such as equality, representativeness, and “empowerment” related to user-generated content is beyond the scope of this paper, but may be found in Van Dijk and Nieborg (2009).

² Many review sites now offer users the opportunity to add multi-modal information (images, video) to their reviews. However, at this point in time, most of the evaluative information about the product or service being reviewed remains encoded at the textual level.

warranted. Consequently, the goal of the present study was to determine where online consumer reviews fall on the continuum of temporality with respect to other forms of social media. In other words, are online reviews as focused on the present as other types of digital media texts? Or is their inherent retrospective orientation (i.e., reviews as accounts of past experience) reflected at the level of discourse? The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

- 1) What is the proportion of references to recency compared with references to the remote past in this sample of online reviews?
- 2) What linguistic resources are used to refer to the present/recent past versus the remote past in online reviews?
- 3) What discursive work is accomplished when online reviewers make reference to the remote past in online reviews?

2. Methods

2.1. Data set

The data discussed below come from a small, specialized corpus of 1000 reviews, which were sampled from five websites associated with reviews of diverse types of products: hotels (*TripAdvisor*), common consumer goods (*Amazon*), restaurants (*Yelp*), films (*Netflix*), and recipes (*Epicurious*). Because past discourse analytic research on online consumer reviews has tended to focus on reviews from only one or two types of sites (e.g., Vázquez, 2011, 2012, 2014a; Mackiewicz, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Pollach, 2006; Skalicky, 2013; Taboada, 2011; Tian, 2013), the present study aimed to widen the scope by examining reviews from a broader range of websites.

The dataset includes reviews of “search goods” (appliances and other tangible objects), “experience goods” (films), services (hotels, restaurants), as well as reviews of a more intangible type of product (recipes). Over 160 different types of products are represented, and the size of the dataset is close to 150,000 words. Although it is impossible to verify, I assume that each review was written by a unique author. A more detailed description of sampling procedures can be found in Vázquez (2014b).

As can be seen in Table 1, considerable variation in average review length is found across the 5 websites. Recipe reviews are the shortest, often consisting of only 1–2 sentences, with an average of 58 words per review. In contrast, hotel reviews tend to be the longest, usually consisting of several paragraphs, with an average review length of nearly 200 words. In general, restaurant and product reviews are almost as long as hotel reviews. Film reviews tend to be a bit shorter, on average. These varying lengths appear to correspond to the cost of the product; when there is more at stake in economic terms, users tend to write longer reviews – and vice versa.

Table 1

Total and average number of words per review, by website.

Site	Product type*	Total number of reviews	Total number of words	Average # of words/review
<i>TripAdvisor</i>	Hotels (100)	300	59,811	199
<i>Yelp</i>	Restaurants (10)	100	18,432	184
<i>Amazon</i>	Consumer goods (24)	200	36,198	181
<i>Netflix</i>	Movies (5)	100	11,408	114
<i>Epicurious</i>	Recipes (22)	300	17,518	58
TOTALS	161	1000	143,367	147

Note. The number in parenthesis following product type(*) indicates the number of unique products for which reviews were collected. Multiple reviews were collected for each product.

2.2. Data analysis

“Choices among linguistic resources, including tense, aspect, indexicals [...] have a decisive impact on the perspective we project on past practice” (Hanks, 1996, p. 269). Every author of an online review can select from a potentially infinite range of linguistic means to express his/her ideas. Some authors rely quite heavily on time references, or markers of temporality – as well as on a chronological structure – to organize their reviews, often drawing on recognizable features of narratives. Whereas other authors chose description as their primary rhetorical mode of organization, do not use as many deictic markers of time, and do not foreground temporal relations in their review. For example, in Vázquez (2014b), I compared narrative and non-narrative reviews, noting that the latter tended to consist of impersonal general descriptions, often formulated with verbless or non-finite verbal constructions, and few, if any, other markers of temporality, as in the following excerpt of a hotel review from *TripAdvisor*.

Review 1

A huge complex with 4 different swimming pools to meet all needs from the slides in the aqua park to the quiet pool with relaxing hammocks beneath the umbrella of palm trees.... heaven! (Also 2 large pools and the beautiful beach with free sunbeds for hotel residents). Quite a few stairs with small elevators so not very suitable for people with walking difficulties and definitely not suitable for wheelchairs as the ramps very steep (from Vázquez (2014b)).

Consequently, I consider any marker of temporality to be a discursive resource – an optional feature, which some reviewers draw upon (while others, such as the author of the above example, do not), in order to convey a particular meaning, or to achieve some rhetorical effect. In defining markers of temporality, I include lexico-grammatical forms (detailed below) that are used to indicate some relationship of time. My focus in this analysis is primarily on references to the present and the past.

Deciding which temporal markers refer to present and past is admittedly a subjective enterprise. As Hanks (1996) explains “the present is neither singularly nor neatly bounded” (p. 271). Thus any distinction between what is recent and what is remote is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and this distinction is perhaps best conceptualized as a continuum rather than a binary (a point to which I will return in the paper’s conclusion). However, because my aim here is to offer a complementary perspective to prior work which has stressed the “here and now” focus of social media, I have chosen to define “recent” quite liberally: any explicit time reference that denotes the present time of posting, as well as the recent past (i.e., one month prior to the posting of the review). In contrast, I consider “remote” time references to be more than one month prior to the posting of the review as well as any explicitly marked indications of non-present time.

The analysis began with an inductive process of reading each review, followed by the identification and coding of all explicitly marked temporal references to immediacy/recency or to the remote past. Based on previous literature (Myers, 2010; Page, 2010, 2012), both lexical (adverbs, adjectives, nouns) and grammatical (adverbial clauses, prepositional phrases, verb aspect) time markers were included. Unmarked instances of simple past (e.g., *This recipe was great*) or simple present (e.g., *These are delicious*) were not included. As mentioned above, recent was operationalized as any reference to the present (e.g., *right now, today, just*), as well as any reference to time within 1 month prior to posting the review. Some examples of present and recent past category are given below, in examples 1a–c. As can be seen, recency can be expressed through various linguistic means, e.g., a single-word

adverb, a prepositional phrase, present progressive aspect, among others

- 1a) *Just started watching and already I'm angry.* [Netflix]
- 1b) *I've had my mat for about a month now and I'm still over the moon...* [Amazon]
- 1c) *To make a long story short, I am typing this...* [TripAdvisor]

In contrast, references to remote past included temporal reference occurring more than 1 month prior to posting of review, or any construction otherwise explicitly marked for pastness. As illustrated in 2a–c, these included prepositional phrases, adverbial clauses, present perfect aspect, etc.

- 2a) *After 1 year and three months of use, it turns out only one of my needs was met.* [Amazon]
- 2b) *As long as I can remember, [restaurant name] has been consistently the primo sushi in town.* [Yelp]
- 2c) *It is the best I have ever used.* [Amazon]

Some reviews included multiple temporal references. Because each sentence was treated as a separate unit, when more than 1 instance of reference to the same temporal category (i.e., either recent or remote) appeared in the same sentence, it was counted only once. For instance, some reviewers used a combination of linguistic features to express remoteness (examples 3a–c) or recency (example 3d). When multiple features referring to the same time category occurred within a single sentence, they were counted as a single reference to that category

- 3a) *I have been dining at the [restaurant name] for over 6 years.* [Yelp]
- 3b) *I have been wanting a blender like this for at least 7 years.* [Amazon]
- 3c) *In my 25 years of business travel, I have never experienced such a consistently, depressingly mediocre property.* [TripAdvisor]
- 3d) *A niece just asked me for the recipe today, so it was memorable* [Epicurious]

Far less common were instances in which both a recent and a remote reference appeared within the same sentence. In these cases, each reference was counted one time. For example, in 4a, the reference to the present (*now*) was counted once, and the reference to the past (*March of 2010*) was also counted once

- 4a) *I got in touch with customer service in March of 2010...it's now June 2010 and the problem is not being taken care of.* [Amazon]

3. Results and discussion

In this section, I begin by presenting overall trends found in the data. The second half of the section offers a closer examination of selected examples from three of the five websites. This two-level

Table 2
Comparison of recent and remote temporal references by website^a.

Site	Product type	Recent	Remote
TripAdvisor	Hotels	28	43
Amazon	Consumer goods	23	48
Yelp	Restaurants	8	10
Netflix	Movies	9	18
Epicurious	Recipes	31	14
TOTAL		99	133

^a To account for differences in the average number of words per review on the five sites, raw frequencies have been normalized to 100.

approach provides a global understanding and a “big-picture” view of the data (which is based on relative frequencies of the various linguistics features used to encode temporal reference) as well as a complementary, more nuanced, understanding of site-specific variation in terms of both form and function.

When considering all of the linguistic features used to express recency and remoteness, the analysis showed that in online reviews, references to the remote past were actually more common than references to current time and recent past, as can be seen in Table 2. Of all five sites, product reviews on Amazon included the most remote references, with more than twice as many references to the remote past than to the recent past. Hotel reviews on TripAdvisor had similar proportions of remote and recent references to those on Amazon. Although Yelp and Netflix reviews included relatively fewer temporal references than the previous two sites, remote references exceeded references to the present and recent past on both sites. The one site which differed from this larger trend was Epicurious, which – in proportional terms – had twice as many references to recency than to remoteness.

With respect to the second research question, it was found that the linguistic resources that are most often used to express recency are different from those used to express remoteness. More specifically, recency tends to be a lexical phenomenon, whereas remoteness is far more likely to be realized grammatically. As can be seen in Table 3, the most productive resources for signaling remoteness are grammatical aspect (i.e., present perfect³ is most common), followed by prepositional phrases. Often these two resources co-occur within the very same sentence, as was seen earlier in examples 3a–c. In contrast, in these review data, recency is most often expressed with a single temporal adverb (*just*, *today*, and *now* are the most frequent) – similar to what was observed previously by Page (2012) and Myers (2010) in other types of digital media.

In order to understand the diverse functions of recent and remote temporal references in online reviews, it is helpful to look more closely at examples from different websites. To address the third research question, I focus on recipe (Epicurious), restaurant (Yelp), and product (Amazon) reviews, because each of these had very different distributions of temporal references: Epicurious was the only site that had more recent than remote references; restaurant reviews on Yelp had slightly more remote than recent references; and product reviews on Amazon had many more remote than recent references.

3.1. Recipe reviews

Of the five types of reviews, recipe reviews contained the fewest marked recent and remote temporal references: only 26 in a total of 300 reviews. Epicurious reviews are also, on average, much shorter than reviews posted on the other four websites. This is perhaps due to the fact that there is not as much at stake where a recipe review is concerned, in contrast to, for example, a review for a very expensive product or service. In addition, Epicurious was the only website that featured more recent than remote references. Table 4 provides several examples of each.

As illustrated in Table 4, the most common linguistic forms used to mark recency in recipe reviews are adverbs (e.g., *today*) and noun phrases (e.g., *this weekend*). In contrast, remoteness is most often expressed through the use of grammatical aspect (i.e., present perfect or past perfect: *have had*, *had given*) as well as

³ Present perfect is conventionally understood as an action or state initiated in the past that continues to the present time. My decision to consider this a feature that conveys remoteness rather than recency is due to the fact that, in these data, present perfect most often co-occurred with other temporal markers associated with remoteness (e.g., 3a–c). Therefore, in this context, I consider the remote meaning of this form to be more salient than its present meaning.

Table 3
Percentages of linguistic features used to express recency and remoteness.

Feature	Recency	%	Remoteness	%
Aspect	Present progressive <i>am typing,</i> <i>am sitting here</i>	1	Present perfect <i>have had, have been, have tried, have made, have stayed, have traveled, have eaten, have used, have owned</i> Past perfect <i>had used, had read, had preferred</i> Present/past perfect progressive <i>have been using, have been coming, have been practicing, had been using</i>	28
Adverb	<i>just, today, (right) now, yesterday, tonight</i> <i>recently, currently</i>	21	<i>ago, later, previously, afterward</i>	5
Adjective	<i>recent, current, new, latest</i>	3	<i>old</i>	2
Noun phrase	<i>Thanksgiving, this past week, this year, last night, this weekend, these days, this time</i>	4	<i>last Christmas, last year, last month, months</i>	2
Prepositional phrase	<i>in the week of 27 June, in May 2010, for 2 weeks now, after a month's use</i>	2	<i>from back in the day, through the years, in 2004, from 2005, in the last 10 years since May 1991</i>	20
Adverbial clause		0	<i>when this first came out, when it opened, when I was 12, as long as I can remember</i>	3
Temporal reference + date stamp	<i>for X-mas dinner 2008 [...] on 12/25/08, my wife and I stayed at the [hotel name] from 2–5 Dec. 2008 [...] review from Dec 7, 2008</i>	7	<i>a Thanksgiving appetizer[...] on 1/24/02</i>	2
Total		38		62

Table 4
Examples of recent and remote reference in Epicurious recipe reviews.

Recent (N=18)	Remote (N=8)
<i>I made this for lunch today serving it with garlic french bread. I am a personal chef and we served this at party this weekend. A hit with the Thanksgiving crowd [...] on 12/06/01</i>	<i>When I tried to beat it again, I remembered a tip my Mom had given me about 45 years ago my all-time favorite recipe since May 1991 when i first discovered it</i>
<i>I made this for Christmas dinner 2008. [...] on 12/25/08</i>	<i>I made this for X'mas dinner. This received great review from my family they asked me to do this again this holiday. [...] on 10/29/07</i>
	<i>I made this for Thanksgiving a couple years ago, and we all ate it and loved it. A niece just asked me for the recipe today, so it was memorable.</i>

prepositional phrases (e.g., *since May 1991*). As seen in Table 4, specific calendar references to occasions such as holidays – combined with a time/date stamp – were also used to communicate both recency and remoteness. These trends in the linguistic forms preferred for expressing different temporal perspectives are consistent with what was observed more generally for reviews, as illustrated in Table 3.

When references are made to the remote past in recipe reviews – as in the final two examples in the “Remote” column in Table 4 – sometimes more temporally-proximal information is also included by reviewers (in bold) in order to make these remote references relevant to the time of review writing. For instance, in the final example, the reviewer indicates that she made the recipe *a couple years ago*. However, what makes the review relevant at this point it time is the more recent request for the recipe from the reviewer's niece. In a similar fashion, the author of the third example in the “Remote” column refers to having made the recipe nearly 11 months earlier, yet establishes the relevance of this temporally distal experience by making a future reference to an upcoming occasion (i.e., do it again *this holiday*). These types of doubly temporally-marked reviews – combined with the fact that *Epicurious* reviews are the only reviews where recent references are twice as common as remote references – suggest an assumption, expectation, or convention that *Epicurious* reviewers post recipe reviews within a few days (or weeks) of using the recipe and making the dish. Furthermore, the majority of the remote references in *Epicurious* – as can be seen in the first two examples in the “Remote” column – do not refer to when the dish was actually prepared, but rather, to some event at an earlier point in time. These remote references often function as a narrative orientation, giving us background information about the user's cooking

history (e.g., *When I tried to beat it again, I remembered a tip my Mom had given me about 45 years ago*), or about how long they have been using a particular recipe (e.g., *my all-time favorite recipe since May 1991 when i first discovered it*). Similar uses of remote past, which provide background information in the orientation segment of a narrative, also appear in blog posts (Myers, 2010).

As Table 4 indicates, it is not unusual for reviewers to make mention of the particular occasion for which the recipe was prepared (i.e., holidays such as *Thanksgiving*, *Christmas*, as well as other occasions, such as *a potluck*, *a party at my husband's office*). Thus, the specific occasion for which the dish was made may be an equally important piece of information to include in a recipe review as when the dish was prepared in relation to the posting of the review.

3.2. Restaurant reviews

Like recipe reviews, restaurant reviews did not include many references to present and past: only 34 references in 200 reviews. However, unlike recipe reviews, restaurant reviews included a slightly higher proportion of remote to recent references (i.e., 19:15).

Once again, the specific linguistic resources used to express temporality pattern similarly to what has already been discussed. In restaurant reviews, single-word adverbs (e.g., *recent*, *just*), and deictic adverbs in particular (e.g., *today*, *tonight*) – which reference a point in time that is relative to the time of writing, and whose meaning is dependent on surrounding discourse – were the most common linguistic forms used to express recency. Conversely, present perfect aspect, finite and non-finite adverbial clauses, and prepositional phrases were the most common forms used to convey remoteness.

Table 5
Examples of recent and remote reference in Yelp restaurant reviews.

Recent (N=15)	Remote (N=19)
<i>The girlfriend and I popped into [restaurant name] tonight. Went there <u>today</u> with my my girlfriend.</i>	<i>So, I lived 3 blocks north of this place <u>when it opened up in 2003</u> or so - In those days it was called [restaurant name].</i>
<i>Came here for lunch on a <u>recent</u> trip back home.</i>	<i>Well, <u>after having been</u> in a few more Ethiopian restaurants <u>over the years</u>, I have to give [restaurant name] only 3 stars.</i>
<i>I <u>just</u> had my first bento!</i>	<i>I <u>have been</u> dining at the [restaurant name] <u>for over 6 years</u> now. The food and service is both top notch and dependable.</i>
	<i>But <u>this isn't</u> Miami Cuban, this is "been in Tampa <u>for over a hundred years</u>" Cuban, so it has far more Spanish influence.</i>

Table 6
Examples of recent and remote reference in Amazon product reviews.

Recent (N=42)	Remote (N=87)
<i><u>Just</u> got this bag <u>a few days ago</u> and have been very happy with the "test drive"! It came <u>today</u>, and I'm glad it did.</i>	<i>I <u>have tried</u> LOTS of mats, including carpet and towels, and this is the best.</i>
<i>I <u>recently</u> ordered a [brand] messenger diaper bag I got mine <u>for Christmas</u>. [...]December 27, 2009</i>	<i>I <u>have been using</u> a [brand of blender] <u>for 26 years</u>.</i>
	<i>But <u>at one year</u> it's already worn down so that the inner plastic grid is exposed.</i>
	<i>I can't comment on durability yet, as I've <u>only had</u> this mat <u>for about 3 months</u></i>

References to the remote past were slightly more frequent than references to the recent past in restaurant reviews and, as illustrated in Table 5, remoteness seems to serve specific functions in this particular reviewing context. One of these functions has to do with establishing a restaurant's longevity. Referring to the remote past is a way to show how long an establishment has been in existence, which may be relevant to its overall evaluation, as seen in some of the "Remote" examples in Table 5 (e.g., *So, I lived 3 blocks north of this place when it opened up in 2003 or so - In those days [...], [...] this is "been in Tampa for over a hundred years" Cuban s*). In addition, remote past references also function to communicate something about consistency in quality in a restaurant's food and/or service (e.g., *I have been dining at the [restaurant name] for over 6 years [...] The food and service is both top notch and dependable., I have been coming here for years with my parents [...] and I have never been disappointed*). Furthermore, references to remote past can also function to establish a reviewer's expertise with a certain type of food or cuisine (e.g., *Well, after having been in a few more Ethiopian restaurants over the years, I have to give [restaurant name] only 3 stars., I've been to Mexico and the food really tastes MEXICAN*), which helps to bolster a reviewer's overall credibility (Mackiewicz, 2008, 2010a, 2010b).

However, a closer look at the data revealed that additional ways of marking time also appeared in restaurant reviews. These other temporal references were not possible to classify in terms of recency or remoteness. Rather than relying on the self as a point of reference (as is the case with temporal deictics), these references instead framed time by specifying when the dining experience happened in restaurant terms. These types of references were used to give readers an insight into the time of day, or circumstances of dining, providing readers with a general sense of the restaurant's pattern of business, specials, food conditions, etc., as can be seen in the examples below

- 5a) *I came by myself at about 12:30, right at the height of lunch time.*
 5b) *Stopped in around 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning when not too busy.*
 5c) *It was a Sunday night so maybe many of their fish were several days old.*

Specifically, 33 such instances were found in the restaurant review data, which is nearly the same amount as recent and remote references combined. In these instances, time is constructed in more general terms (*lunchtime, a Sunday night*) rather than in more

egocentric terms: that is, *a Sunday night* as opposed to *last Sunday night*. Often in these cases, the indefinite article is used (*on a Sunday morning*) to indicate that presumably similar circumstances could be found on *any* Sunday morning. Reviewers who make use of these more general temporal references are showing their awareness that the time and day of the visit may be relevant to the overall quality of the dining experience. Their evaluation is often contingent on these temporal circumstances.

3.3. Product reviews

Unlike recipe and restaurant reviews, product reviews included many recent and remote references. In fact, of the five websites analyzed, product reviews on Amazon were the most remote-focused, with more than double the number of remote references compared to recent references. In terms of the linguistic resources used to express recency and remoteness, the very same trends that have been discussed with respect to the other sites also apply to product reviews: mostly (single-word) adverbs are used to indicate recency, whereas grammatical aspect and prepositional phrases are most commonly used to express remoteness (Table 6).

It is important to point out that Amazon reviews did include a number of references to recency. Often, reviewers used these to indicate their satisfaction or enthusiasm about a recently purchased or recently received product, as can be seen in the first two examples in the "Recent" column in Table 6. Temporal deictics such as *a few days ago*, or *today* anchor the time of receiving the product to the time of posting the product review. However, product reviews featured more than twice as many remote references (compared to recent references), and often one of the functions of references to the remote past is to construct a sense of reviewer expertise with the product itself (e.g., *I have been using a [brand of blender] for 26 years*), or with the larger category of the product (e.g., *I have tried LOTS of mats, including carpet and towels, and this is the best.*), as seen in examples 6a and b.

- 6a) *My wife and I are both 47 years old and have owned our fair share of blenders.*
 6b) *I have been using loose teas for many years.*

In many cases, the remote past was used to provide information about the longevity or durability of a product. Information about a product's longevity or durability was often linked to

consumer's satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – with the product, as can be seen in the final two examples in the “Remote” column in Table 6. This finding was consistent regardless of the product type being discussed (e.g., blender, diaper bag, yoga mat), as illustrated by examples 7a–c

- 7a) *Our [brand of blender] jar washer assembly failed after 3 years of very sporadic use.*
 7b) *Also mine is tearing at the handle after only 4 months!!*
 7c) *But within 3 months of practice [...] the top layer began to crumble.*

In addition, in a few exceptional instances (e.g., 8a), references to the recent past appeared with information about the lack of durability of a product. However, in general, most of the recent references in product reviews were linked to positive evaluation and satisfaction (expressed in terms of *happy*, *glad*, and *love*), as illustrated by the first two examples in the “Recent” column in Table 6, as well as example 8b

- 8a) *10 days, 10 smoothies, the motor died dramatically with a spark...*
 8b) *I have had my [brand of blender] for 2 weeks now and I love it.*

So although references to both the present time and the recent past do occur with considerable frequency in online product reviews, remoteness may be especially important in these types of reviews, to let other users know about the expected lifespan of a given product. Furthermore, perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this study is that some users post reviews several months – or even several years! – after purchasing a product, as can be seen in examples 9a and b

- 9a) *It's durable. I've had this over a year and it looks brand new.*
 9b) *We use our [brand of blender] regularly, and have for the past two years.*

In this context, it may be the case that reviews such as 9a and b – with their very remote past references – are among the most “useful” for readers, by providing other consumers first-hand information about how well the product holds up over time.

3.4. Recent and remote references deployed by reviewers

Up to this point, I have illustrated temporal references in brief excerpts from review texts. In order to understand how these resources operate in the context of an entire review, I now focus on two examples of complete reviews: one which highlights a recent perspective, and one which emphasizes a remote perspective. This contrast allows us to observe how different linguistic choices are involved in creating different temporalized perspectives within the genre of online reviews.

As discussed earlier, recency was more frequent than remoteness in reviews of recipes. The following example is the most recent-focused of all of the recipe reviews. It is also anomalous in that it is one of the few recipe reviews that gives the impression of conveying breaking news, as a result of the inclusion of the temporal deictic *right now*.

Review 2

Delicious! Hassle-free, all ingredients are throw in at once. The 8 cloves of garlic produces a very rich mellow flavor...loved it... making it again right now by A Cook from New York on 04/15/00

While it is not impossible for review authors to multi-task – i.e., to cook and post reviews online simultaneously – cooking is an activity that normally requires a considerable amount of attention, as well as the use of both hands. Consequently, the majority of the temporal references classified as “recent” in recipe reviews projected a temporal relationship that was at least some time prior to the actual posting of the review: e.g., *earlier today*, *last night*, *over the weekend*. In the brief and mostly evaluative review shown above, the author indicates that she had already made and enjoyed the recipe at an earlier point in time, indicated by the past-tense verb *loved*, which conveys some unspecified time prior to the current posting. However, by the end of her review, the reviewer frames her post as breaking news, via the combined use of the progressive aspect (*making*) and temporal deictic *right now*; by doing so, she stresses the timeliness and immediate relevance of her review.

In contrast, the following review emphasizes a remote time perspective. This review from *Amazon* is posted under one brand of blender (“Blender #1”), which the reviewer indicates that he has owned *for about 7 or 8 years*. In his review, the author contrasts this product with the main competitor's product (“Blender #2”), which he indicates that he has purchased *just [...] a few months ago*. In the body of the text, the author exploits a prototypical comparison-contrast rhetorical structure.

Review 3

[Blender #1] makes excellent products. I have owned this one for about 7 or 8 years and **just** purchased a [Blender #2] a few months ago, as well. Both are great blenders. Comparison of differences:

1) Motor - [Blender #2] has a more powerful motor. Noticeably more powerful - 3 HP vs 2 HP.

[Approximately one page of text omitted. Reviewer provides a comparison of the 2 blenders based on 10 additional features: construction, noise level, controls, warranty, height, containers, performance, splashing, guarantee, and return policy.]

I have enjoyed them both. Both are great products. I like the [Blender #2] a little better in terms of performance, but the [Blender #1] did a good job, too. [Blender #1] customer service was really excellent.

A remote perspective is signaled in the second sentence of this review via the use of present perfect (*have owned*) combined with a prepositional phrase (*for about 7 or 8 years*). Of course, along with indicating an earlier starting point, perfective aspect also communicates a sense of continuity. However, through these particular linguistic choices, the author highlights the historic nature of his relationship with Blender #1. These choices encode a particularly past-focused perspective: the author could have chosen instead to frame his relationship with both products in more of a present time perspective (e.g., *I currently own both blenders*), but did not.

Writing a review for a product that one has owned for over seven years is certainly not the norm on *Amazon*. So, in order to establish the relevance of his actions, in the next clause, the reviewer indicates that he has – somewhat more recently – purchased the competitor's product (i.e., *Blender #2*). Although the adverbial *a few months ago* does represent a remote point in time with respect to the writing of this review, it is preceded by the adverb *just*, which contrastively connotes a sense of immediacy that establishes the current relevance of the review. Certainly, in relative terms, *a few months ago* is more recent than 7–8 years ago, and it is thus this comparatively “newer” purchase that provides a justification for the author's review of Blender #1

(though it could be argued that this actually is a review of both blenders). The majority of the verbs that follow in the product descriptions are in present tense, yet in the final paragraph, the reviewer once again returns to using present perfect (*I have enjoyed them both*), and not simple present (i.e., *I enjoy them both*). The use of present perfect rather than simple present here underscores the historicity of the author's first-hand experience with both products, and helps to construct him as a well-informed and credible source of information. In other words, the author's evaluations are informed by his prior, long-term use of both products, and are not simply a reaction to the appeal of a novel purchase. My earlier speculation that references to the remote past, by offering a historical perspective on a product, provide information that is particularly useful to readers is supported by the fact that, at the time of data collection, this review appeared as the first 5-star review of Blender #1; its position was the result of the number of helpfulness votes (i.e., "201 of 203 people found the following review helpful").

4. Conclusions

Contrary to what has been previously emphasized about temporality in other types of social media, references to the remote past are not only common in online reviews, but on several review sites, they even outnumber references to present or recent past time. Prior research on temporality in online discourse has tended to focus primarily on lexical features, for example Myers (2010), who observed that *just* is the most common time marker on blogs. Similarly, Page's (2012) comparative focus on time markers in different types of social media focused only at the level of lexis, without taking into account the grammatical resources that are often deployed in the construction of temporality. In this respect, the present study has built on and extended previous findings on this topic, by examining a wider range of linguistic features used to express temporal reference. The findings here indicate that, in order to provide a more complete picture, future studies of temporality in online discourse should consider not only lexical markers of time, but also other grammatical resources used to signal temporal relationships. Grammatical markers of time may be less perceptually salient than lexical markers, yet – as this study has demonstrated – they may be used much more frequently in conveying remoteness.

The study's findings also indicate that some patterns of temporal references in online reviews may be site-specific: for example, remote references were the most frequent in *Amazon* reviews. This may be related to the nature of the product being reviewed. Most consumer goods have a durative dimension, making remote past temporal references much more relevant in reviews of products on *Amazon* than in reviews of recipes and restaurants, where consumer experiences tend to be more ephemeral. As was suggested earlier, future research on *Amazon* reviews might consider whether there is any relationship between remoteness (in particular, reviews written several months – or even years – after having received the product) and "helpfulness ratings" of reviews (Skalicky, 2013).

Online consumer reviews represent a particular type of social media, with its own specific purposes (i.e., evaluation, recommendation, persuasion), as well as its own relational dynamics: i.e., author and audience are usually unknown to one another in a "offline" sense, and most often, they do not have an ongoing relationship. While an orientation to "breaking news" may occur in some online reviews (as we saw in Review 2), it appears to be more the exception than the norm; and this may be one feature that distinguishes online reviews from other types of social media. Although a reviewer may post multiple reviews for various

products on the same website, it is likely that the audiences for each of those reviews will be different. In other words, because of the loose ties between authors and audience, online review posts lack the ongoing-ness that is so closely linked with the breaking news genre (Georgakopoulou, 2013), and that typifies *Twitter* and *Facebook* updates. And yet, references to the remote past are also appearing in social media sites such as *Facebook*, as we see in "Throwback Thursday" posts (where users post – and comment on – old photographs of themselves, family members, or friends), as well as in other kinds of historically-oriented posts, which enable users to publicly reminisce about the past, as for example Georgalou (2015) and Heyd and Honkanen (2015) have shown.

Finally, analyzing temporality in discourse is no easy task, as reflected by the scarcity of research on this topic. As Hanks points out, "the trouble with time is that you can't step back from it long enough to get a handle on it" (p. 273). Recency and remoteness interact in various ways, and in some of the above examples from reviews, we can observe some of the challenges in interpreting a linguistic feature as referring to present or past. For instance, we saw one author use the adverb *just* to convey a sense of immediacy and current relevance to a purchase that he made *a few months ago*. Certainly it could be argued that temporal references are always relative: for instance, a purchase made *a few months ago* is relatively more recent compared to one made *several years ago*. However, it is also the case that *a few months ago* is in no way analogous to *right now*, thereby warranting an interpretation of remoteness. Ultimately, recent and remote are best viewed as points along a continuum, rather than a binary – and it is important to attend to both when examining temporal reference in discourse, regardless of the medium of communication.

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